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ABSTRACT

A study was conducted to examine motivation as a precursor of reading achievement in middle school students. The California Media and Education Librarians' Literature Reading Survey (1984) was used as the instrument for collection of data. Sixth graders (n=753) of varying ability were studied in six different settings. Data were coded in 10 ethnic groups, listed as: Spanish Surname, Black, Other White, Filipino, Chinese, Indochinese, Korean, Other Non-White, Samoan, and Japanese. Some positive indications of the survey's reliability may be seen in the large gender differences among the sample: females were twice as likely as males to be interested in reading. The first year study revealed that 12-year-olds are more alike than different, and are equally apt to be interested/disinterested in reading, regardless of community or ethnic factors. One year later, a second study was conducted with the same subjects (now in grade 7) to assess any changes that may have occurred during the past year. It would seem that by age 13, about 10% of the students have begun to lose interest in reading, but 20%-30% have gained in interest. During the second study, the subjects were also asked to nominate friends in order to examine the friendship patterns derived for indications of clusters of interested/disinterested peers. An analysis of the services of libraries who serve middle school patrons was also included in order to assess the way they are perceived in adolescent society. (Forty-one references are attached.) (MG)

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Middle School Students' Attitudes about Reading

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I. Introduction

In California, instructors who teach curriculum and instruction courses for teachers must themselves work with children every third year. During such a "Faculty Participation" experience, we developed a "Hooked on Books" program for bilingual sixth graders.

Unexpectedly, we got the feeling that semester that sixth graders were enthusiastic about reading whether they could do it or not. That high motivation from students of poor ability set us to speculating--and, so, we decided to test the hunch. Our study of middle school students' interests and attitudes is, of course, a study of motivation "because intrinsic motivation involves interest and enjoyment, assessing subjects' interest and enjoyment allows us to infer intrinsic motivation" (Deci & Ryan, 1985, p. 35).

II. Theoretical Background and Rationale

Affective Factors of Motivation:

Interests and Attitudes

Reading Researchers have often studied the affective factors of certain individuals in an effort to unravel the mysteries that

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lie behind reading ability. Studies of proficient and poor readers at a single point in time have considered such things as personality (Wollner, 1949; Durkin, 1966; Hake, 1969; Hutchison, 1971; O'Rourke, 1979); age, sex, and intelligence (Norvell, 1950; Landy, 1977); home literary environment (Hansen, 1969; Hess, et al, 1982); socioeconmic status (Landy, 1977; Whitehead, et al, 1977); the community, the school and the particular teacher (Norvell, 1950; Healy, 1963; Landy 1977) in order to understand the causes of reading success and failure. The results of these many studies, however, have been contradictory and disappointing as predictive of children's reading achievement.

In that light, it seems especially appropriate to study motivation as a precursor of reading achievement because the act of reading, as other human behavior, is an end state of motivation, the product of interacting needs and gratifications. The term motivation is used to designate all latent and aroused goal states at a given point in time (Kuhl, 1986). "Goal states" are those that drive, orient, and select behavior. Motivation theorists, those who study the why of the thought-action sequences of human behavior, claim that people respond out of needs for (a) achievement, (b) affiliation, and (c) power. None of these things can be seen, however, only inferred from overt behavior.

Educators interested in school achievement have sometimes overlooked the role of affective aspects of motivation toward that end, yet researchers such as Khan (1969) found affective

factors more predictive of achievement than study habits, and Bloom (1976) believed academic self-concept, school and subject related affect, were all-important to achievement. Further, Bloom (1976) hypothesized that affective characteristics can account for as much as a quarter of the variance in cognitive achievement. Affect, he believed, determines the extent to which a learner will exert the necessary effort to learn a specific task. According to Maehr (1984), "Whether or not persons will invest themselves in a particular activity depends on what that activity means to them" (p. 123). Analyzing the work of Davé (1963), Bloom (1964) found affective concerns (e.g., home values and academic guidance) to be among the most potent predictors of the likelihood of school achievement. Norvell (1950), in his examination of children's reading interests found reading ability is relatively less crucial than an interest in reading.

Affective factors of motivation are values, attitudes, beliefs, and interests. Attitudes, beliefs, and values determine the <u>degree</u> of liking or disliking, while interest determines the <u>direction</u> of people's actions (Feather, 1987).

Interest has been defined as a "characteristic disposition, organized through experience which impels an individual to seek out particular objects, activities, understandings, skills or goals for attention or acquisition" (Getzels, 1956, p. 7). Interest, Getzels (1966) claimed, is narrower in scope than are needs. "The need for achievement may, for example, find

expression in the school situation in the arts, sciences, athletics, or extra curricular activities. The need is the same; the interests are different" (Getzels, 1966, p. 93). Thus, interests may be considered to be sharply focussed expressions of underlying needs.

The terms attitude and interest are often confused or used in ways which suggest that they are almost interchangeable; however, attitude is the wider term and represents a general orientation of the individual. Interest is more specific than attitude and is directed toward a particular object or activity (Evans, 1965). Attitude does not necessarily entail an interest, but interest always entails an attitude. In the case of reading, a child cannot be interested in a book and have no attitude toward it (Purves, 1972), yet the reverse may not be true. I may be favorably disposed, for instance, toward artichokes, but have no interest in them at all.

As early as 1890, William James asserted that interest plays an important role in directing attention--and thus behavior (Deci & Ryan, 1985). Today, many motivation theorists also think that interests are conscious choices made by the individual, not simple stimulus/response mechanisms. Weiner (1987) argues that "emotions are elicited by antedating thoughts about causality and that they provide a synopsis of the past while at the same time directing the future. Hence, emotions are the synapses of motivational life, joining thinking with acting" (pp. 21-22). The importance of this concept is that it suggests that the analytic

sequence begins with the organism rather than the stimulus. Stimuli are not seen as impinging on the person so much as options that the person can attend to and interpret (Deci & Ryan, 1985). In other words, people can be seen as selecting and interpreting stimuli in accordance with their needs and orientation.

Of the two attributes, attitudes and interests, interests seem to be the more volatile and subject to change over time, even a brief time, according to Fryer (1931) who reviewed the research of the early decades of the century. Among the early researchers of such topics, Terman & Lima (1931) found that at about age twelve, children developed a "reading craze" during which phase they read more than they ever had before or ever would again. Anderson (1948), as many others, came to similar conclusions and noted that an interest in reading began to wane for many students by age fourteen. Similarly, Bloom (1964), who designed a learning curve with which to examine longitudinal studies of school achievement, stated that by age thirteen the child has reached 75% of the general achievement patterns to be seen at age eighteen (grade 12).

Thus, our concern for the middle school years is because it seems that students at those grade levels are children whose attitudes and interests are most volatile and vulnerable. The sixth grade may be the pivotal year, the last period of maximal influence toward reading and school achievement. We believe,

too, that this time is also the beginning of a period when children become more influenced by forces outside the family. O'Rourke (1979), in a study of 519 ninth graders and 300 parents, found that parents are not much like their children in reading and book habits and, at the junior high age, parents are not as influential as they seem to be in elementary grades. We are convinced, therefore, that this is also a time when school interventions, based on careful study and analysis, could be most effective. Indeed, it may be the last chance we get to make significant changes in young people's lives.

Many researchers (Terman & Lima, 1931; Norvell, 1950) have matched the developmental nature of changing reading interests with the psychological, social, and physical growth of young people. Fifty years ago, Thorndike (1935) wrote that "wants, interests, and attitudes not only influence behavior and modify the behavior of organisms; they also are themselves changed. They are strengthened and weakened by the course of inner development and by the experience of life" (p. 5). Currently, Kuhl (1986) believes patterns of interest to be dynamic, changing and interacting, not episodic, isolated phenomenon (p. 3).

Veroff (1965) contends that only a longitudinal study can demonstrate consistency among enduring characteristics that one can unhesitatingly label "dispositions." Because of the "reading craze" first noted by Terman and Lima (1931) and the predictable learning curve demonstrated in the work of Bloom (1964), it seems logical to begin with the sixth grade (12 year olds) of middle

school when students are still susceptible to change and before the attitude and interest patterns of later years have become fixed.

Over the years, reading attitudes and interests have continued to fascinate some few reading researchers and practitioners. Names like Lewis and Teale (1980), Estes (1971), Summers (1977), and Squire (1969) spring to mind for their persistence of interest in research about the affective domains of reading.

All of the above, and more that we've not cited, clearly suggests the need for research into students' interest in reading and the need to monitor students' changes in attitude toward reading in order to determine more precisely what it is that creates the differences in motivation that lead some youngsters to become readers and others to reject that activity. Only when we have precise and accurate data can we plan powerful school and library programs to overcome the loss of interest among early adolescents that seems currently common.

III. Design of the Study

A primary consideration in the choice of an instrument to be used with children of vastly heterogeneous reading ability is, of course, its ease of administration with minimal amounts of teacher intervention. Some very elegant measures (e.g., the work of F. H. Wallbrown (1982)) must be abandoned for their lack of simple classroom utility.

To begin this study, we scoured the literature to see what had been done before and in that process located the California Media and Education Librarians' Literature/Reading Survey (1984) which purports to survey: a) interest in reading, b) use of leisure time, c) reading interests, and d) knowledge of literature. An advantage of this instrument, it seemed to us, is the data collected beyond the items measuring attitude, i.e., use of leisure time, reading interests, and knowledge of literature, which give us a larger social context in which to place reading attitudes.

Studies of people's interest patterns are generally of three types (a) subjective surveys based on self-report; (b) objective measures of the activities in which people actually engage; and (c) choices based on simulations of real experiences. Our survey is of the first type, based on student self-report about behavior generally believed to be common among voluntary readers. Important, too, the entire survey can be completed by even the slowest students in a 40 minute period.

The Literature/Reading Survey contains 21 items of attitudes about reading, 16 items about the use of free time, 16 items about reading interests, and 19 items about knowledge of literature. We eliminated two items from those of the survey of attitudes; one which asked students to express themselves as "happy," OK," or "sad" when asked to give a book report, and one which asked students how they feel when being read to. We eliminated the book report item because it might have been inter-

preted to mean an oral book report and few students, particularly second language ones, look forward to oral reports of any kind. Also, the item about being read to seemed specious because good readers often prefer to read independently.

When subjects are asked to respond to interest surveys, it is usually not difficult for them to determine whether their reaction is positive or negative toward a particular activity, but Fryer (1931) stated it is more difficult to express indifference and vastly more difficult to estimate the degrees of feeling. He suggested that three "degrees of feeling" (e.g., "sometimes," "seldom," and "never") are all that can be assessed with valid results. Likewise, our experience with these children led us, pragmatically, to reject measures that employ Likert scales as being too complicated for independent responses by poor or unsophisticated readers. Thus, using a 2-1-0 scale for "often," "sometimes," or "never," for the Reading/Literature Survey, we obtained a total possible 38 points for the remaining 19 items concerning the respondents' reading attitudes.

Estimates of feelings, either to situations or simulations, of course, are limited by the options presented, whether items on a survey instrument or choices available in the environment. We feel this is particularly important when comparing students in varying settings, e.g., differences in opportunities for activities between suburban and urban communities. An English study, for example, compared preferences of reading and TV in two

villages; one of the villages had only a single TV channel, the other had only two. We don't know how comparable that is to an American town where books and libraries compete for attention with seven or more TV channels, not to mention the dreaded computer games.

After choosing the instrument, we first administered it to two gifted sixth grade classes (n=65) in a city school and based upon satisfactory results (viz., time and ease of administration and scoring) decided to survey all of the incoming sixth graders in two typical middle schools (n=228 and n=240). These schools were organized along lines of somewhat homogeneous ESL, regular, and gifted ability groups. In all, the two schools yielded 468 subjects of whom 182 were ESL, 215 were regular track, and 71 were in classes labeled gifted. From there, like Topsy, this study "just growed"--seemed to have a mind of its own, getting larger and larger like the "Blob that ate Cleveland."

Because our city has "alternative" schools, schools chosen by parents outside usual school boundaries, as well as "assigned schools, we surveyed two alternative school classes (n=41) to see whether children who come from homes where parents choose their schools differed from those who come from homes in which parents accepted assigned schools. In addition, for comparison purposes, we added two classes (n=48) from a suburban school and two (n=60) from a school in a semi-rural community. Thus, in that first year we surveyed 753 sixth graders of varying ability in six different settings.

We have been concerned throughout our study about the reliability of the instrument. Some positive indications of its reliability may be seen in the large gender differences among the sample: females are twice as likely as males to be interested in reading. Using the split-half (odds/evens) method, we obtained a reliability coefficient of .787, a respectable but not superior number. At the moment, we are in the process of recasting the sample to remove ESL subjects from the calculation to see whether that effects reliability and we have done a test/re-test survey of a new sixth grade class (not included in our sample) as another method of boosting the reliability coefficient. Still, there's nothing really wrong with .787, but we can't resist playing with the data. In addition, for further information about validity, we have added another sixth grade class solely for the purpose of comparing the teacher's opinion of readers' attitudes to that obtained by the Reading/Literature Survey.

While there has been some evidence that interest/attitude is not related to ability among early adolescents (they've not yet learned the concept of talent vs. ability and believe that achievement is related only to the amount of effort expended), we found some of the other data surprising. For your general information, the subtest of "knowledge of literature" on this survey rather accurately measures ability as it is defined in schools. It distinquished between our homogeneous groups, ESL, regular, and gifted, and correlates highly with the CTBS scores collected

by the school district each spring. As one might expect, in an urban community with a high percentage of new Americans, suburban children were more knowledgeable than all but gifted inner-city sixth graders. We offer that simply as an aside, perhaps as validation of the instrument, for our concerns were more focussed on the students' attitudes toward reading.

III. Results

Beyond, the differences in gender noted previously, our first year survey revealed no significant differences in interest among students of varying ability, ethnicity, or socio-economic status. Further, we found no differences between groups of inner-city, suburban, or semi-rural youngsters for the traits measured. Simply said, the first-year study revealed that twelve-year-olds are more alike than different, are equally apt to be interested/disinterested in reading, regardless of community or ethnic factors.

As uncommon as it seems in educational studies where one usually seeks a difference in scores, we prefer to gloat over the lack of differences we found. Incidentally, in San Francisco, we didn't need coded numbers to disguise the gender of respondents. Because of the large numbers of non-European names, we had to consult school records to know whether the subjects were boys or girls. It is in this area, our multi-ethnic population, that we believe our lack of differences is most significant.

Our data is coded in ten ethnic groups, Spanish Surname,

Black, Other White, Filipino, Chinese, Indochinese, Korean, Other Non-white, Samoan, and Japanese. Because of the size of our sample, we could collect reasonable numbers of each of those ethnic groups. When we tallied them by classes and schools, we found each ethnic group evenly distributed above and below the mean. In other words, Asian children who seem likely to be valedictorians of their classes are no more interested in reading than black or brown children at age twelve.

These data are surprising when we consider the likely composition of ninth grade remedial classes in cities such as those in which this study was conducted, where minorities comprise a significant portion of the population; at that time, such classes may be safely predicted to be mainly composed of Black and Hispanic youth. Faced with such data, one cannot help but wonder what happens in the years of seventh and eighth grade to change the attitudes of these particular adolescents toward reading and schooling.

In this, the second year, we have surveyed the former sixth graders (now in seventh grade) in order to assess any changes that might have occurred during the year that has elapsed. Although the statistical analyses are not yet complete, just "eyeballing" the data suggests that drastic changes have not yet taken place. It would seem that at age thirteen, about ten percent of the students have begun to lose interest in reading (compared to last years' scores), but twenty or thirty percent

have gained in interest. Subject to analysis will be whether the transient students (our schools have a twenty percent transiency factor) are the ones most susceptible to ever-lowering scores, thus accounting for the relative increase in interest among the stable population.

In addition, this year we have asked the students to nominate friends and we will examine the friendship patterns thus derived for indications of clusters of interested/disinterested peers. Motivation and the affective factors of which it's composed (e.g., interest, attitudes, beliefs) is, of course, culturally derived. In the culture of schooling, peer relationships and group membership exert tremendous power over adolescent behavior, perhaps even determine the likelihood of an expressed interest in reading. In addition to satisfying human needs for affiliation, group membership allows for social comparisons that enable a child to learn about him or herself in relation to others and to make judgments about standards of behavior (Veroff, 1969). Obviously, the positive or negative attributes of group membership depend upon the composition of the group.

Even if not of their own choosing, students are likely to be introduced to groups through school tracking patterns which undoubtedly affect the types of peer association that can occur during school hours (Epstein, 1983). There is some evidence (McDill & Coleman, 1963; Woelfel & Haller, 1971) that peer influences during adolescence are more compelling than either parents or schools.

Bloom (1964) and Chandler (1978) also noted the existence of such behavior among individuals of 'subenvironments.' Subenvironments are "largely made up of cliques of persons with whom the individual is in greatest sympathy. Such individuals place the larger environment at a remote distance and consequently are less affected by it. In a sense, these individuals are also living in some isolation from the larger environment. They are thus less likely to be motivated and stimulated by the larger environment" (Bloom, 1964, p. 198). Bloom hypothesized, too, that environments were most likely to affect individuals during periods of the most rapid normal development, a period, for instance, such as that of the middle school years. At later stages in normal development, he suggested, only the most powerful and consistent environment was likely to produce marked change in an individual or group.

Finally, the value of libraries, both public and school, cannot be overestimated when considering the development of attitudes toward reading. In a sense, libraries may be considered as book retailers for young readers; their obligation to entice consumers is obvious. In this second year, we have asked students to indicate which branch libraries they visit. Our study includes an analysis of the collection development practices and the services of the libraries who serve middle school patrons in order to assess the way they are perceived in adolescent society.

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